



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



01 March 2021

**Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600**

migration@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Inquiry into Australia's skilled migration program

This submission on Australia's skilled migration program is prepared by the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO), an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC).

The ACBC is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the vehicle used by the Australian Catholic Bishops to address issues of national significance.

The ACMRO is one of several agencies/ministries established by the ACBC to address important issues related to migrants and refugees.

More than 60 per cent of Australians profess a faith, and more than one in five Australians are Catholic. More than 25 per cent of Australian Catholics were born overseas.

The Catholic Church performs several duties to help promote unity within this diverse country including teaching the importance of care and acceptance of people from different background and providing spiritual and pastoral care for people who are sick and outcast.

The ACMRO seeks to participate in public debate by making reasoned arguments that can be respectfully considered by all people of goodwill.

The ACBC appreciates the opportunity to make a submission on this important issue.

The purpose of the skilled migration program and whether it is meeting its intended objectives, including

- 1 a) if any immediate adjustments are necessary in the context of the future of work and pandemic recovery, and**
- 1b) if more long-term structural changes are warranted.**



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The initial purpose of skilled migration in Australia was to stimulate post-war economic development and increase the Australian population to protect the country, should another war occur.

Today, the skilled migration's main purpose is to improve the economy and fill skill shortages across Australia.¹

It is undeniable that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on Australia's economy. The impact of the pandemic will significantly affect the size and composition of the Immigration Program in 2020 – 2021.²

Many Australians are now unemployed due to the pandemic. It is the highest unemployment rate in many years, which suggests that the government will prioritise employing Australians before opening its door to immigrants. The last three decades have significant changes within Australia's labour market. Job growth has not kept up with increases in the supply of labour, resulting in considerable increases in unemployment and underemployment.

Acting Minister for Immigration, the Hon Alan Tudge MP, announced a new Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List (PMSOL) on 02 September 2020 in an attempt to fill urgent skills needed in critical sectors to help create Australian jobs, which will ultimately boost Australia's economy. The 18 occupations on the PMSOL are based on the advice from National Skills Commission and with other relevant Commonwealth agencies.³

Prioritising Employer-Sponsored, Global Talent and Business Innovation and Investment Program visa will help the Australia's economy. However, we believe that every human being has the right to access to freedom of movement and resources so that they can live a fulfilling life. The Australian government should particularly welcome those who are facing precariousness, abandonment, marginalisation, and rejection because of COVID-19 regardless of their legal status or geographic location.

In the area of Skilled Migration, the Australian society is also in need of pastoral agents, across the faith landscape so well celebrated in our Country aimed at offering the people of Australia the necessary pastoral care. In this way, the Skilled Migration Program will comprise not solely the economic benefit, but the holistic human approach which is so necessary for the wellbeing of the person.

¹ Phillips, J. (2006, June 05). "Skilled migration to Australia". AHP. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/Skilledmigration

² PRONIA. (2020). Migration to Australia in the midst of the pandemic. Retrieved from <https://www.pronia.com.au/news-events/migration-to-australia-in-the-midst-of-the-pandemic/>

³ Department of Home Affairs (DHA). (2021). Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List. Retrieved from <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/employing-and-sponsoring-someone/sponsoring-workers/pmsol>



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2. Australia's international competitiveness in attracting entrepreneurs, venture capital, start-ups, and the best and brightest skilled migrants with cutting edge skills;

Australia has been a top preference for people aiming to migrate. There are many reasons why people choose Australia including high-quality educational and healthcare system, multicultural society, career opportunity and quality of life; just to name a few.

The Australian government created visa programs specifically to attract highly skilled professionals to work and live permanently in Australia.⁴

1. Global Talent Independent program

The program is designed to grow Australia's innovation and tech economies. It gives opportunities for both Australia and Global Talent Visa holder in a way that skills are learnt from each other, it promotes innovation and creates jobs for Australians.

2. Global Talent Employer Sponsored program

The program is designed for Australian employers to sponsor overseas workers for highly skilled positions that cannot be filled by Australians or by other visa programs.

3. Supporting Innovation in South Australia

SISA is a new visa arrangement, which is currently being tested in South Australia. It encourages foreign entrepreneurs to develop their work in South Australia, which will add value to the local community by creating jobs, enhancing business innovation and investment. This program will be available Australia-wide once it is proven a success.

Australia is improving its competitiveness amongst other countries by having a streamlined visa for highly skilled migrants.⁵ Australia can access new markets, products, and services by implementing the above visa programs. It will sustain economic growth and create new jobs, which will lead to raising living standards and promoting social inclusion.⁶

Everyone in Australia is entitled to basic rights and protection at work, including skilled migrants. Agencies such as The Fair Work Ombudsman and The Freedom Partnership are available to support workers to promote a balance workplace relation and empower survivors of exploitation. Today, slavery still exists in modern Australia. Skilled migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation as they lack legal protection and may be exposed to wage theft and other mistreatment at work.

⁴ Migration Down Under. (n.d.). Global Business and Talent Attraction Taskforce. Retrieved from <https://migrationdownunder.com/australian-visas/individual-visa-options-australia/globalbusiness-talentattraction-australia/>

⁵ Department of Home Affairs (DHA). (2021). Global talent employer sponsored program. Retrieved from <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/working-in-australia/visas-for-innovation/global-talent-independent-program>

⁶ Ldon, J. & Dyer D. & Bradley C. (2014). *Compete to Prosper: Improving Australia's global competitiveness*. (2014) (p.2). Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/au/~media/McKinsey/Locations/Pacific/Australia%20and%20New%20Zealand/Our%20Insights/Compete%20to%20prosper%20Improving%20Australias%20global%20competitiveness/Compete%20to%20prosper%20Improving%20Australias%20global%20competitiveness.ashx>



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Skilled migrants often face many challenges even before coming to Australia. It is becoming more common for skilled migrants to fall victims of fraudulent migration agents that take advantage of their vulnerability and eagerness to work in Australia. In certain cases, skilled migrants were charged with fees for their visa applications that were never lodged.

On certain occasions, skilled migrants come to Australia with their spouse. For the spouse to also work in Australia, it is common for them to find odd jobs, work long hours and/or study before Australian employers can recognise their qualifications from their country of origin.

We recommend that the Government provide incentives for the private sector to invest in regional areas; increase its investment in building infrastructure that improve connectivity, higher education, universal basic services, and amenities to entice businesses to expand their presence in rural and regional areas; and offer flexibility and assistance to skilled migrants to relocate in regional Australia; recognize overseas qualifications as this will help skilled migrants and their family financially, which will ultimately improve settlement of skilled migrants Australia.

We also recommend that the Government should consider an easier scheme for sibling/parent to also migrate to Australia as this will provide a form of support to skilled migrants and ease the social isolation issues that numerous migrants face. Migrants are vulnerable because of their separation from family and, in some cases, challenges in forming connections with members of the local community. Those factors make them susceptible to exploitation.

For this reason, we respectfully argue that pastoral care should be an integral part of the Skilled Migration Program so that the search for skilled people will not merely focus on the economic gains but also on the human needs and rights of workers and their dignity. The Catholic Church and other religious faiths have a special expertise in offering pastoral care workers of multi-cultural background who can help people to 'belong' and can help to protect the rights of vulnerable migrants.

Yours sincerely,
Fr Maurizio Pettena CS